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Onto-Technics in Bryant, Harman, and Nancy

SUSANNA LINDBERG

The title “onto-technics” points at, or actually unfolds, an apparently contradictory task of thinking at the same time the dignified, timeless questions of ontology and the instable swirl of everchanging concrete technologies. It suggests that thinking ontology in terms of technics has become a timely task for philosophy and that the best way to undertake this task is by examining the conflict between ontology and technics.

To start with, we need to clarify the philosophical concept of technics. The root of the concept, and not only the word, is the Greek term *techné*, which was defined by Aristotle as the art of producing things that do not have their aim in themselves and that can also be otherwise or not be at all (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 6, 4.1, 1140a 6-25). Being pure means, *techné* cannot really come to being without aims set by human beings—or by nature itself (Aristotle, *Physics*, 194a21 and 199a15). Aristotle understood *techné* primarily as an art or a skill, like the know-how of the doctor, or like anything that we might today put under the term of *technique*. In another sense, *techné* would reside in technical objects, such as tools, instruments, and equipment that are presently included in the term *technology*. By “technics” I will denote the entire constellation of subjective techniques and technological objects, which are both indispensable aspects of the philosophical question of *techné*. The German *Technik* and the French *technique*, which are the subject of many of my sources, have been translated into English quite variably as technics, technique, and technology. In order to give unity to my argument, I will favour technics, but I will also use the other terms when they have been chosen by the authors commented upon.

In the Aristotelian framework of thought, technics did not exist by nature but was always somehow produced, and this is why it was always *artificial*. Enlightenment thinkers such as Rousseau and Diderot were interested in this artificiality that did not characterize only the objects of human industry but much more essentially human culture, which can be sublimated into techniques and arts of living together as well as degraded into dead mechanisms of an artificial society¹: as Hegel put it in the

¹ See in particular Diderot’s *D’Alembert’s Dream* and Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men*.

famous analysis of *Bildung* in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Enlightenment brought out the ambiguity of human artifice that is at the same time the cause of alienation and of culture, art, and progress.

However, as Bernard Stiegler has shown in the introduction to his fundamental work *Technics and Time I*, throughout the classical period of philosophy, technics was never a central object of inquiry. In this period, philosophy rarely thought that technics, being pure means, could add its own mark in the human activities that it was means for, as if it had aims of its own. This conception would begin to change with industrialization, and it was thoroughly revised in the 20th century by the Marxist philosophers of the Frankfurt School (Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse) as well as by many phenomenological philosophers (Husserl and especially Heidegger). These thinkers realized that modern industrial technologies had become much more than simple tools of human intentions: they had grown into a planetary system that has an instrumental rationality and, in a manner of speaking, aims of its own. Increasingly, human beings were reduced to tools and resources of the technological system, rather than the contrary. At this time, technics was thought of as a horizon determined by modern technology that imprints its forms and logics onto human beings, overdetermining their techniques of living. In this new situation, the philosophical problem of technics was interpreted in terms of a technical system (*Ellul*) and especially in terms of *Ge-stell*, Heidegger's famous word for the essence of technics. Around the middle of the 20th century, the tone of the continental interpretations of technics tended to be very critical, as technics was seen as a domain of artificiality threatening the acquisition of truth (thought in terms of image and representation, technics appeared closer to simulation than to truth). From this perspective, what is without truth necessarily lacks ontological foundations and prevents the positing of the question of being, as Martin Heidegger said in his famous analyses of the epoch of technics.

In what I call here the post-phenomenological² developments of the latter half of the 20th century, the role of technics has gradually changed. On the one hand, Simondon has sought to analyze the technical object in itself and not only in relation to human aims and social needs. In doing so, he looked for a positive interpretation of technical objects, underlining their role in the creation of new associated *milieux* in which human beings find themselves implicated, thus paving the way for Deleuze and

² The term "post-phenomenology" does not refer to a school of philosophy whose members would identify themselves through a common program. I use the term simply as a shorthand that singles out thinkers who, like Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy, are influenced by phenomenology but also by its critiques by other currents of thought, such as post-structuralism, and that cannot therefore be counted simply as phenomenologists.

Guattari's readings of the world in terms of "machines." On the other hand, in Jacques Derrida's work, and even more explicitly in the works of Bernard Stiegler, the un-truth of technics appears as the quasi-transcendental condition that makes it possible to examine, not the ontological foundation of the world, but, on the contrary, its lack of any such foundation. As an excellent illustration of an ontology of lack and negativity, technics also appeared as an invitation to investigate other modalities of *logos* and sense rather than transcendent ideas or scientific truths.³

These introductory remarks bring us to our subject, namely to the question of an ontological interpretation of technics. In the history of philosophy of technics, the outline of which I have just sketched, technics was mostly interpreted in an anthropological context in the light of the question of what technics does to the human being. However, a very different, ontological perspective has emerged recently. If, in the 20th century, interest in technics often went hand in hand with an interest in knowledge and language that prevailed over traditional problematics of being, the 21st century has witnessed a strong renewal of interest in ontology in all currents of philosophy. Today, even analytical philosophy, which had long been hostile to metaphysical constructions, studies the ontological foundations of reality, the fundamental structure of which is postulated to be consistent with mathematical natural sciences like quantum mechanics. Phenomenology has approached ontology in a very different manner because it necessarily includes some existential concerns—but these have spanned from the experimental sciences, like biology and psychology, which interested Merleau-Ponty, to art and religion, which have traditionally confronted the entire problematics of the sense of existence.

It is in this landscape that I would like to examine a particular hypothesis according to which technics, far from blocking the way to the question of Being, gives privileged access to ontology. The concept of technics is not useful to ontology for the reason that it is self-evident that our contemporary lifeworld is massively determined by technological objects and systems. Of course it is: we do not need to use and understand all modern gadgets in order to recognize the concrete presence of technics everywhere and, more fundamentally, we do not need to know *what* technics is in order to see *that* technics is there. There is technics, *il y a la technique*. However, we are only interested here in the philosophical advantages of the examination of Being through technics. Firstly, techno-

³ I take the liberty of referring to two articles in which I explain Heidegger's and Derrida's views on technology in more detail: "Lost in the World of Technology with and after Heidegger" and "Derrida's Quasi-Technique."

ontologies will turn out to be necessarily materialist, and this is why they allow us to bypass the theological undercurrents of many phenomenological ontologies that (from Heidegger to Jean-Luc Marion and beyond) are directed towards truth as well as the nihilistic problematics of the end of thinking that haunt many post-phenomenological approaches (especially Maurice Blanchot). Secondly, the artificiality of technics also prevents its explication in terms of naturalist materialism, which has turned out to be quite problematic as well. Of course, “nature” means different things in different contexts: some philosophers, like Rousseau, postulate “nature” as a domain of purity behind “culture” (which is nonetheless accessed through culture) whereas others, especially in the analytic tradition, understand “nature” as the referent of the natural sciences (that is nonetheless accessed via scientific instruments and hypotheses), but all find themselves incapable of reaching nature in itself.

Now, unlike God or Nature, technics is not an inaccessible source of truth, for it is a historical reality that is immediately known to all. Technics is neither true nor false by itself. Rather, it is an interface between science, nature, and human beings; it has an intermediary way of being that cannot be reduced to natural necessity or to human freedom. If it is evident *that* technics determines our reality overwhelmingly (even if it is not clear *how* it does this), this is not because we are ignorant of our condition but because technics is *essentially* ambiguous. As classical philosophers have shown since the time of Plato, technics is artificial, illusory, and false. It does not really reveal nature but at most imitates it, and never without at the same time disguising, modifying, or polluting it. Religion and science promise, albeit differently, an inaccessible truth eventually transmitted through eminent emissaries. Technics does not offer any such truths (it is on the contrary famous for its illusions)—but it is familiar and we know how it furnishes our world. The philosophical sense of technics is very close to that of “world,” for it determines our immediate environment, but it is a world without sense and unity, a world of pure mediation, relation, change, and contingency.

Because technics is worldly and terrestrial, it is also material—but it demands that we redefine the very sense of materiality. We will soon see that in contemporary philosophy, the “materiality” of technics has nothing to do with the ultimate building blocks of reality (like in antique materialisms) or with the productive processes of human society (like in dialectical materialism), both of which provided a positive ground for reality. On the contrary, the materiality of technics is so abstract that it is almost immaterial, hardly more than an experience of withdrawal of the principles of the articulation of being. Almost immaterial, technics is nonetheless material, but in such an overwhelming and protean manner that it is impossible to reveal it directly as such.

Against the background of these general considerations, I would now like to show how the “materiality” of technics has been used by several contemporary thinkers to articulate their ontological projects. Most prominent such approaches have come from the post-phenomenological tradition, others from the “school” of “speculative realism in its various anti-phenomenological manifestations.”⁴ In what follows, I will give two examples of the speculative realist techno-ontologies and compare them with a phenomenological one. Through this quick review and comparison, I hope to pinpoint the general stakes of the question.

I. Bryant’s Machines and Harman’s Tool-Being

“Speculative realism” and “object-oriented ontology” name a contemporary current of philosophy whose proponents differ from one another in important ways while sharing a fundamental attitude towards the task of philosophy. The current was inspired by the critique of “correlationism,” formulated by Quentin Meillassoux in *After Finitude*, according to which philosophers from Kant through Husserl, Heidegger, and up until Derrida examine reality only as the subject’s projection, thus falling short of the philosophical task of examining reality as such. I will not discuss Meillassoux’s theory, which has been widely commented upon (and criticized, see note viii). Instead, I will examine two approaches that could rather be situated in the camp of object-oriented ontology and that articulate their ontologies in terms of technics. Of course, speculative realism and object-oriented ontology are simply very general indications of intellectual inheritances and affinities: the thinkers in question do not realize a common program.

Levi R. Bryant’s *Onto-Cartography* presents an ontological system that aims to reformulate materialism in today’s context. Bryant is opposed to post-structuralists insofar as they are thought to only consider discursive or signifying entities, and he proposes to analyze the world purely in terms of material realities. There are no hierarchies between entities so that, say, “banyan trees, sequoias, cephalopods... microbes, viruses, Amazonian rain forests, coral reefs and hitherto yet unimagined technologies” (Bryant xi)—everything whatsoever—are equal realities that are themselves composed of other realities and that compose other bigger entities. Everything, even ideas and concepts, is material in this way. But “matter” is nothing massive or substantial. Bryant’s key conceptual choice—a direct continuation of Deleuze and Guattari’s famous thesis in *Anti-*

⁴ “Speculative realism” was first of all the name of a colloquium held at Goldsmith, London University, in April 2007 with Ray Brassier, Iain Hamilton Grant, Graham Harman, and Quentin Meillassoux.

Œdipus—is to call all such elementary units of being “machines.”⁵ He defines a machine as a being that functions or operates (1). A machine does not need to be rigid and “material” in the everyday sense of the word, for there are also many abstract and creative machines. This is possible because machines (for instance, trees) are not designed, and even the machines that are constructed by human beings (for instance, chairs) result from negotiations between constructors, materials, and machines, rather than from the imposition of a form on matter (17-20). Machines do not have in-built purposes or uses either, but they can become *media* for other machines: “A machine functions as a medium for another machine ... whenever it modifies the activity or becoming of any other machine” (33). Onto-cartography is the investigation of such structural couplings between machines: it maps the couplings between machines, the modifications that these couplings induce, and explores territories (or “ecologies”) that are opened in this way (35).

If everything is machine—a plurality of machines—what is a machine? “A machine is a system of operations that perform transformations on inputs thereby producing outputs” (Bryant 38). Machines are not stable things but they *are* their functioning: they are defined in terms of what they take in, modify, and produce. In the constant flow of functioning, machines are plastic things. In their functioning, machines are connected to other machines, in such a way that reality is entirely *transcorporeal*—they are media to one another, not just to anything that happens to be close, but selectively to what functions with them. This is how machines make assemblies that are immediately new machines (77). There is no void between machines, machines act on one another via media that are themselves machines (118).

As I cannot present Bryant’s entire system here, I will only present its general structure with the help of one of his principal examples: climate change. Bryant is strongly opposed to the phenomenological way of understanding reality as the world of somebody (for instance *Dasein*). Instead, he thinks “world” in terms of “ecologies” in which all kinds of machines are connected, where their functions are not determined relative to a privileged being (113). In this case, climate is thought as the ensemble of climatic systems and not as the weather that affects human beings in a given place. The study of an ecology thus consists of three stages. Firstly,

⁵ Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus* famously starts like this: “It is at work everywhere, functioning smoothly at times, at other times in fits and starts. It breathes, it heats, it eats. It shits and fucks. What a mistake to have ever said the id. Everywhere it is machines—real ones, not figurative ones: machines driving other machines, machines being driven by other machines, with all the necessary couplings and connections” (8). Bryant echoes this in his definition of machines: “They whirr, they buzz, they spin, and rumble. A world is a fabric of machines” (37).

one has to establish its topology, that is to say, show how its machines are related to one another (and not how they are situated in a given space-time). This does not mean that one should reduce entities to their relations, because then it would be impossible to explain the fact that sometimes entities manage to escape their situations (181). As a matter of fact, planetary climate is an excellent example of the way in which all kinds of (natural, technological, social, etc.) entities are connected without being reduced to mere effects of the climate. Secondly, in order to study an ecology, one has to indicate the “gravity” of a machinic assembly—knowing that gravity is not a machine’s power over another one but the way in which the becoming of a machine is mediated by another (193). For instance, the electoral campaign of a big country can “weigh” on world’s climate even if the latter was not an explicit theme of the former. And thirdly, the study of an ecology requires that one *cartographies* it, *deconstructs* the relations of gravity that rule over it, and *terraformates* other possible ecologies (279). For instance, one can cartography the present climatic change, deconstruct machinic assemblies that function in it by showing how they contribute to changes in the climate (knowingly or not), and propose to change these assemblies in order to permit other kinds of terraformation (for instance, how does contemporary industrial agriculture contribute to climatic change and what kind of reorganisations of agricultural practices would lower its climatic impact?).

Bryant’s “onto-carto-graphy” is attractive, for it is a beautiful assembly of conceptual machines that fit and work together well. Bryant uses contemporary natural scientific terms (like topological space, gravity, black hole, dim and bright objects, and so on), giving them new roles as operators of a materialist ontology. What is more, his ontology reflects progressive political concerns, of which the ecology of climatic change is only an example. However, Bryant’s construction also poses a number of important questions. Like all successors of the speculative realist thematics, he rejects all examination of the subject position, and this is why he never examines or justifies his own approach to ontology. He therefore leaves unanswered a question that is to my mind decisive: what is the status of his speculation? His system is really a speculative construction made of scientific terms that are not used scientifically but—in all senses of the word—*fantastically*. This system is a game of imagination that toys with science but cannot be proven by it, or by anything else, and this is why it could be taken for a dogmatic position. For a thinker like Deleuze this would not be a problem because the criterion of a concept is less its truth than its capacity of functioning and producing effects. From this point of view one could say, for instance, that the political usefulness of Bryant’s system does not make it *true* but shows it to be *useful* and maybe even *just*. Nevertheless, as a philosophical system, Bryant’s ontology would be more solid if he explicitly addressed this problematic.

Another thinker inspired by speculative realism who has constructed an ontology on a technological motive is Graham Harman, who develops, ever since *Tool-Being*, an ontology of “tool-being.” He underlines that “tool-being” is not a philosophy of technology but a general ontology (*Tool-Being* 180). Harman says: “If this is ‘materialism,’ then it is the first materialism in history to deny the existence of matter ... instead of materialism, it is perhaps a new sort of ‘formalism’” (293). (To me it seems, however, that one could also claim that all philosophical materialisms are very abstract theories about the form of matter, but this is not the point here). In what follows, I will present Harman’s “object-oriented ontology” very briefly, only in order to see how one can come to think Being as tool. I will not follow his system any further because his concepts and his readings of philosophers, including Heidegger, who is the very subject of *Tool-being*, would need to be addressed through lengthy commentaries, which is not my purpose here.

“Tool-being” is Harman’s theory of being. It is based on the famous analysis of the tool (*Zeug*) developed by Heidegger in *Being and Time*, but with an important change: tool-being is not about human *praxis*, but about the way in which things are in themselves.

The true question of philosophy is not between humans and reality (*Dasein-Zeug*) but between objects and relations ... humans, dogs, oak trees, comets, ice cubes and atoms are on the same level. One should not exile objects into natural sciences, with condescence and fear, but make a real philosophical analysis of things in themselves. (Harman, *Tool-Being* 2-3)

In addition to this counter-phenomenological principle, Harman supports an anti-post-structuralist and anti-analytical-philosophical principle according to which reality consists in objects, not in linguistic units of sense (180).

In the end, Harman claims that Heidegger was mistaken in everything except in his analysis of tools, and even there he was mistaken insofar he understood tools merely in terms of human equipment.⁶

⁶ Among countless examples one can quote for instance Harman’s claim that “Heidegger is a rather monotonous philosopher who has almost no other subject than the constant reversal between absence and presence, or tool and broken tool” (*The Quadruple Object* 51). Then: “Heidegger more than anyone else is the one who has shown this. By contrast, the *Zuhandenheit* of entities is apparently bound up with human use, and Heidegger adds that tools are not isolated, but exist in a global system. Yet to accept this at face value is to take the word ‘tool’ too literally, for we have seen that the tool-being of a thing withdraws not just from human theory and praxis, but from any relations at all” (54). Reducing Heidegger to his analysis of the tool’s *Vorhandenheit* and *Zuhandenheit*, and then detaching the tool from the *Dasein* who uses it, amounts to mishandling Heidegger so strongly that one wonders why Heidegger should be cited at all.

According to Harman, objects are not only meaningful for human beings, who would decide what they *are* and what they are *for*. Instead, objects also signify to one another, they are *for the sake of* one another (*Tool-Being* 34). Within the cosmos, all things are “tools,” which means that they are composed of the two dimensions of *Vorhandenheit* and *Zuhandenheit*, which Harman translates quite quickly into “tool” and “broken tool,” defined as objects examined in context vs. objects released from their contexture. Detached from the context of the analytic of *Dasein* and of the “hand,” tool-being is not the visible realm of things but the invisible realm of being from which the visible realm of things emerges (24).

If in *Tool-being*, Harman examines objects insofar as, according to him, they “exist in utter isolation from all others” (*Guerrilla Metaphysics* 2), in *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, he attempts to show how events and relations between objects are possible. Now, rejecting the phenomenological idea of *appearing* (to the subject), Harman has to explain the getting-out-of-oneself of totally closed objects in another manner, and this is why he says that although objects cannot enter into relations, their qualities can (20). At first, it is difficult to see how qualities could serve as mediators between objects because qualities are also objects (164-165), which seems to lead to an infinite regress of increasingly smaller and impenetrable intermediary objects. Harman claims to solve this problem by introducing *elements* that mediate between objects, elements being “a face turned by one object towards another” (166). Nevertheless, it is hard to see how objects could be at the same time *entirely* withdrawn into themselves and nonetheless *facing* one another. In his definition of the element, Harman refers to the “carnal phenomenology” of Emmanuel Levinas, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Alphonso Lingis, although he is also opposed to them insofar as, according to him, they think the elemental as only the formless *il y a*. Harman’s own concept of element is quite different, he insists, insofar as the elements are many and turned towards one another instead of being a unitary dimension of being that withdraws from sight. Thus, in Harman’s thinking, the elements are synonymous with qualities or sensations and they function as the building blocks of reality. Harman just affirms that the element, being an object’s facing towards another, is the mediator in the “vicarious causation” thanks to which closed objects can nevertheless be related to one another (*Guerrilla Metaphysics* 159-178). We will not dwell any longer on Harman’s theory, but we can simply point out what seems to us to be its core problem: once one has defined objects to be inaccessible in-themselves, every solution to build a bridge between objects appears like a *deus ex machina*.

What have Bryant and Harman taught us concerning the utility of examining being in terms of technique? Both speak about being with the

help of a technological metaphor: “ontology of machines” and “tool-being.” No doubt, this choice helps them avoid relying on concepts defined, for instance, in theology, mathematics, or the natural sciences and allows them to construct a purely philosophical system that does not rely on exterior justifications. At the same time, this very advantage can also be a handicap because the authors examined here do not explain their choice of a technological vocabulary. After all, the current signification of a technical object (such as “machine” and “tool”) is an *artificial* thing that has been constructed in view of something else than itself. Ordinarily, artificial things imply a constructor and an operator, and this is why some kind of a subject position is inscribed so strongly in the term itself that its suppression risks producing, so to speak, an *artificial* definition of artificiality. The question arises as to whether it would not be easier to avoid the problem by speaking only about “material beings.” Or if “matter” sounds too inert, why not speak about “living beings” (knowing that the vitalist philosophy of nature that culminates in Whitehead is closer than one might suppose here)? Bryant and Harman do not answer the question “Why technique?” any more than Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Edipus*, as if the choice of the term could be dictated by a simple aesthetic or ideological preference.

Bryant and Harman do not only share a terminological preference, they also share a more general philosophical commitment. Both depict reality as a multiplicity without totality and speak about it in terms of ecology. Both postulate that machines/tools are closed, impenetrable, and incapable of touching one another. In order to relate these to one another, both authors insist on mediators: Bryant calls them media, whereas Harman calls them elements. Bryant analyses the media in terms that come from astrophysics and Harman uses a mixture of philosophical terms from carnal phenomenology and classical empiricism. Yet, it is far from clear why objects should be hermetically closed. This requires our object-oriented philosophers to add other, mediating objects between the objects proper; and, because the mediating objects are not ontologically different from the objects proper, and are thus also closed, we are led to an infinite regress in which still other objects are needed to build the bridge between objects, *ad infinitum*. Below we will see another solution to an analogous problem that is in my opinion more elegant: it comes from Jean-Luc Nancy’s thinking of the “ecotechnology” of “singular plural being” in such a way that beings—“corpora”—are never closed but always already open and *exposed* towards one another, being finally nothing else but this exposition. Contrary to what Harman says of Nancy, the latter does not presuppose an indistinct mass of being that cannot explain its own fragmentation.⁷ Nancy does not reduce beings to their relations either, for

⁷ According to Harman, the core of Jean-Luc Nancy’s thinking would be “[the] shapeless ‘whatever’ preceding all specific beings” (*The Quadruple Object* 8-9)—but, on the

the singulars are really event-experiences that can only be exposed on the ground of the withdrawal (of what is not seen, known, etc.). Nancy's post-phenomenological solution seems more elegant to me than the speculative realist solution because it avoids the problem of the *regressum infinitum* of mediators.

What differentiates Harman from Bryant is the philosophical framework. Bryant speaks in a Deleuzian context: this is why he explores *territories* and seeks to *cartography* them. Harman speaks in a phenomenological (Heideggerian) context, which he attempts to deconstruct. His program appears much more problematic because he wishes to suppress the very heart of phenomenology—the interrogation of subjectivity—while keeping some of its terms (*Vorhandenheit* and *Zuhendenheit*, sensations, carnality, elementality, etc.) that were originally defined entirely in relation to subjectivity. He bypasses the fact that even a deconstructed subjectivity (carnality, elementarity, singular plural being) is still an account of subjectivity without which the terms are stripped of their significance.

Bryant and Harman share two features that actually go together, namely the overlooking of the problem of subjectivity and the arbitrary character of their systems. Consequently, the question of method is not touched by these thinkers, especially by Harman, as Peter Wolfendale shows in his *Object-Oriented Philosophy*.⁸ The decision of overlooking the question of the subject that is inherited from initial speculative realism leaves them unable to explain the status of their constructions. Consequently, they can only appear fantastic and imaginative, at best, and dogmatic, at worst. Nothing can verify a theory of an ontology of machines and media or of tool-being: they are to be found neither in experience nor in science, they are just imaginary structures and mind-games. This does not have to pose a problem, for the artificial and contingent character of the system can be taken to reflect and illustrate the arbitrary and contingent character of Being that is under scrutiny (contingency was already the fundamental modality of Being in Meillassoux's *After Finitude*). But it seems to me that the justification of such an artificial system requires an explicit examination of its character as an artificial construction, as a philosophical machine or tool constructed by a philosopher-technician who does not claim that his/her construction is

contrary, Nancy defines his thinking of singular plural being by opposing it to the thinking of being as One: "*The plurality of beings is at the foundation [fondement] of Being. A single being is a contradiction in terms*" (*Being Singular Plural* 12).

⁸ See the chapter 2, "The Withdrawal of Arguments," of Wolfendale's *Object-Oriented Philosophy*.

exactly true, but that it is efficient, useful, or beautiful. But this would also require taking into consideration the subject position.

II. Nancy's Ecotechnology

In numerous texts, philosophers issuing from the (post-)phenomenological tradition have sternly rejected the accusation of "correlationism." Meillassoux's critique is no doubt simplistic—he attacks a rickety "straw man" without paying heed to the fact that it is impossible to reduce post-Kantian philosophy to a Berkeleyan *esse est percipi* when numerous philosophers since Nietzsche have deconstructed the very principle of subjectivity (just think of Freud, Heidegger, Foucault, and also early Nancy,⁹ whose later works we will soon examine). We will not linger on this well-known debate here.¹⁰ What interests me is not the question of subjectivity but the theme of technique in contemporary ontology. Out of the "post-phenomenological" tradition I choose Jean-Luc Nancy, who has since 1990 occasionally analyzed being in terms of *ecotechnology* (*écotechnie* might be better translated as *ecotechnics*, but I follow the translator's choice here).

In a very general manner, one can differentiate philosophers who draw their inspiration from phenomenology (even in deconstructed form) from speculative realists by noting that the former refer ontology to experience, and in particular to the experience of the world. The concept of world is necessarily connected to a "subject" (or *Dasein*) who has experience of it, but at the same time the world is not the projection of the subject but, on the contrary, a concrete situation given to the subject. Being in the world constitutes the subject, although it might do so only negatively, as a *loss* of world and of self. One could say wryly that what speculative realists do not see is the *givenness* of the world even when it does not "make world."

Given phenomenology's search for primordial ground (Husserl's attempt at regrounding sciences in the life-world, Heidegger's valorisation of *physis*, etc), one might think that the phenomenological tradition would

⁹ Nancy's deconstruction of subjectivity is presented in a concise manner by Marie-Eve Morin in her introduction to the English translation of Nancy's *Ego Sum* (xv-xxviii).

¹⁰ One can admire a particularly witty way of warding off the anti-subjectivist attack in Slavoj Žižek's *Less than Nothing* (2012). Žižek shows how Meillassoux's critique was already turned down by Hegel, not to mention later thinkers like Lacan or—surprise!—quantum theory (Žižek 621-647). A similar argument is developed by Frank Ruda in "The Speculative Family" and by Alenka Zupancic in "Realism in Psychoanalysis." Another effective criticism is Catherine Malabou's *Before Tomorrow: Epigenesis and Rationality*.

favour the natural world instead of its technological duplicates: it would take technics as a domain of alienation, illusion, and falsehood behind which philosophy should seek nature, *physis*, or authenticity. However, it would not be difficult to show that already Heidegger (whom one takes to be the main defender of the anti-technological party) is actually a great thinker of the fact that, in all cases and necessarily, technique frames the world. After him, Nancy has constructed a techno-ontology that goes much further, firstly by analyzing technology in the context of the contemporary world as “ecotechnology,” and secondly by enlarging the hermeneutics of contemporary “ecotechnology” into a study of its ontological condition. The characterization of Nancy’s ontology as being a techno-ontology does not come directly from himself: although the word ecotechnology was coined by Nancy, it is not the only name for his thinking of “singular plural being”—it is, rather, only one of its aspects. The interpretation of Nancy’s singular plural being as a techno-ontology has been developed in particular by Erich Hörl, whose interpretation is indispensable here.¹¹

Before describing Nancy’s techno-ontology, let me say a few words about why his thinking is not affected by the critique of correlationism. In general, Nancy’s thinking of the world,

is not so much about a subject and a world as it is about references that send the world back into itself and to itself, about the profusion of these referrals and the way that they thus create what could be called a sense, a sense of the world that is nothing other than its appearing with: that there is a world, and all that is in the world, and not nothing. (Nancy, “Of Struction” 53)

In order to understand why this is not a reflection of the world by the subject but the reflection of the world in itself, it is necessary to remember some other features of Nancy’s thinking. According to the fundamental axiom of his ontology, being is not one, “but at the ground of being there is a plurality of being.”¹² Being is plural, but contrary to “tool-beings” or

¹¹ Nancy speaks of ecotechnics already in *Corpus* but also in *Being Singular Plural* (133-140) and in *The Sense of the World* (101-102, 138-139). The theme is well highlighted by Erich Hörl in “The Artificial Intelligence of Sense.” See also Hörl’s “A thousand Ecologies” and “Le nouveau paradigme écologique.”

¹² “A single being is a contradiction in terms. Such a being, which would be its own foundation, origin, and intimacy, would be incapable of Being, in every sense that this expression can have here. ‘Being’ is neither a state nor a quality, but rather the action according to which what Kant calls ‘the [mere] positing of a thing,’ takes place (‘is’). The very simplicity of ‘position’ implies no more, although no less, than its being discrete, in the mathematical sense, or its distinction from, in the sense of with, other (at least possible) positions, or its distinction among, in the sense of between, other positions. In other words, every position is also dis-position, and, considering the appearing that takes the place of and takes place in the position, all appearance is co-appearance [*com-*

“machines,” these “beings” are not closed in on themselves like the building blocks of Being, the mediations between which remain inexplicable. Instead, for Nancy, the sense of being is *existing*, that is to say, being-to-oneself-outside-of-oneself. “Exposition, here, is the very being (what’s called ‘existing’)” (Nancy, *Corpus* 35). Existence is always *exposed* to other existences: things cannot exist alone because the very sense of existence comes from other existences. In this way, existence is shared (*partagée*): it does not mean that existents would belong to any supposedly common Being, but that they *are with* one another. (In passing we can note that although Nancy thinks singular existence “in relation or as relation,” for instance in *The Experience of Freedom*, his way of thinking existence as shared existence does not boil down to the “relational ontology,” such as the one rejected Harman. For although the existence of the one is conditioned by its exposition to the other, this does not mean that everything would be only relation, with beings entirely lost in one another, because the correlate of exposition is the withdrawal of the secret “heart of being”). In *Being Singular Plural*, existents are above all human beings in their being-with (*Mitsein*). However, *Corpus* shows that the world of bodies/things (corp[u]s means both) consists in all kinds of things, human and animal, natural and technical:

Hoc est enim: this world-*here*, stretched out here, with its chlorophyll, its solar galaxy, its metamorphic rocks, its protons, its deoxyribonucleic double helix, its Avogadro number, its continental drift, its dinosaurs, its ozone layer, the stripes of its zebra, its human beast, Cleopatra’s nose, the number of petals on a daisy, the ghost of a rainbow, the style of Rubens, a python’s skin, André’s face in this photo taken on January 16, this blade of grass and the cow that grazes on it, the nuance of an iris in the eye of the one reading this very word, here and now? (Nancy, *Corpus* 33)

In “Of Struction,” Nancy observes that this does not necessarily amount to a world anymore: “Still the bits and pieces or ‘elements’—which are never elementary enough—of this great ‘element’—in the sense of a milieu or an ecosystem which is an *ecotechnology*—constantly escape the grasp of every construction” (52). Existence is the way in which all human beings “touch” one another, but also all kinds of bodies and things touch one another, without limit, without hierarchy. As Nancy says even more clearly in *After Fukushima*, contemporary events like the Fukushima nuclear accident show especially clearly that the world is not only the community of human beings but the connection of all kinds of beings and events—natural, technological, economical, social. As unique, singular,

parution]. This is why the meaning of Being is given as existence, being-in-oneself outside-oneself, which we make explicit, we ‘humans,’ but which we make explicit, as I have said, for the totality of beings” (Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* 12).

and *incommensurable* as they may be, they are also *equal* in the sense of equally existent and equally world-building.

Nancy underlines that in this general equivalence of existence, the distinction between *physis* and *techne* has lost its pertinence. If, following Aristotle, *techne* is both an imitation of *physis* and also what brings to completion what *physis* cannot do alone, technique is not the other of nature but a part of its own growth. At the same time, there is no nature that would not already be technical and open to technical supplements (Nancy, "Of Struction" 46-47). In other words, the opposition between technique and nature that was a constitutive distinction for enlightenment thought has given way to a generalized techno-nature (as exemplified especially by phenomena such as global warming and contemporary biotechnology).

How does this affect our notion of the world? In traditional philosophy until at least Heidegger, "world" was understood as a world of sense: world was more or less coextensive with a cultural, religious, political, and scientific community. A world that has a sense is a world that has an aim, a *telos*, a spiritual aim that is not a simple consequence of natural or technological processes. In the middle of the 20th century, philosophers and other cultivated people were often worried about the extinction of such aims: although technological evolution had become quicker than ever, spiritual aims seemed to disappear. The end of a world that makes sense seemed to be like the end of the world itself, for instance in a technological apocalypse. Lack of sense as the ground of the world appeared mostly nihilistic and cynical. According to Nancy, today's globalized world is neither a world with aim and sense nor a world based on pure lack. But how to describe it then? Having lost spiritual sense, it is driven by natural, technological (and economical) evolution. In order to describe this globalized techno-ecological evolution, Nancy invents the term *ecotechnology/ecotechnics* (*écotechnie*):

Our world is the world of the "technical," a world whose cosmos, nature, gods, entire system is, in its inner joints, exposed as "technical": the world of the *ecotechnical*. ... The ecotechnical creates the world of bodies in two correlative ways: for the projections of linear histories and final *ends*, it substitutes the spacings of time, local differences, and numerous bifurcations. The ecotechnical deconstructs the system of ends, renders them unsystemizable, nonorganic, even stochastic (*except* through an imposition of the ends of political economy or capital...). At the same time, the ecotechnical, linking and connecting up bodies in every way, placing them at sites of the intersections, interfaces, and interactions of every technical procedure, far from turning bodies into "technical objects" (as is often said today, by those who think, furthermore, that they know what a "technical object" is) sheds light

on them as such, through this *areal* connection, which also creates space for the withdrawal of any transcendental or immanent signification. (Nancy, *Corpus* 89)

“Ecotechnology” is partly a description of an epoch: it describes our epoch insofar as it has given up political and spiritual forms of sovereignty and goes on as an endless economical and technological administration of things (Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* 129-144). Technique has traditionally been understood as a domain with no proper aims: technique is the means of nature’s or human beings’ aims but it does not have any aims of its own. Now that nature’s and human beings’ aims have disappeared, what remains is technique, a domain of “means without aims” as Agamben would say as well, which endlessly changes its means into aims without being able to give these aims any definite character.

“Ecotechnology” is also a name of an ontological structure that our epoch has brought to the fore. It claims that being is the being of technonature in such a way that technics (technique and technology) is not an imitation of being but the originary appearing of being. Furthermore, technics does not represent whatever appears but all appearing is techn(ological). This can be taken as a strong move against classical phenomenology: there is no pure being nor pure appearing, but both being and its appearing are from the start eco-techno-logical. On the other hand, this does not contravene Nancy’s own ontology of corps and sense because these have been “ecotechnological” from the start.

Ecotechnology is an ambiguous logic. Its ambiguity can best be understood in terms of an epochal change that we are enduring right now. The past world of sense (for instance the world of Hegel, Marx and even Heidegger) wanted to put ecotechnology in the service of production of sense and of aims: technological and economical activity was expected to serve as a general good. Supposing that this is over, in the sense that there are no more aims or searches after sense anymore, what remains is an endlessly proliferating ecotechnique that changes means to ends indefinitely without ever progressing anywhere. Nancy analyzes this situation with a new name, “struction.” The neologism comes from the words *construction*, *destruction*, and *instruction*, the common root of which would be, he says, *struction*. It means a situation that is typical of technological functioning, in which things are considered only insofar as they function and not insofar as they construct or destroy a world of sense: “*Struo* means ‘to amass,’ ‘to heap.’ It is truly not a question of order or organization that is implied by con- and in-struction. It is the heap, the non-assembled ensemble. Surely it is contiguity and co-presence, but without a principle of coordination” (Nancy, “Of Struction” 48-49).

“[S]truction, in the sense of heaping up [*amoncellement*] without putting together [*assemblage*]” is the fundamental feature of our epoch of

ecotechnology (Nancy, *After Fukushima* 36). This can be taken in a critical sense: this is a world of limitless capitalistic and technological growth that makes no sense other than its own self-augmentation. But it could also be taken in another, liberating sense, in which freedom and creativity would not be determined by a mourning of lost sense but could instead be reinvented under the rule of “struction,” supposing that the pure technicity of struction could reflect upon itself. Nancy does not develop this possibility much further, but Hörl has elaborated it in terms of a restricted and a general techno-ecology: if restricted echotechnics still aims at producing works (*œuvre*), general echotechnics would learn to enjoy the absence of *œuvre*, the simple inoperativity (*désœuvrement*). This would amount to working against the dream of future unification and coherence, working for the present plurality insofar as it is capable of becoming freely. Of course, when struction is analyzed in terms of *eco-technics*, it is not the structure of the universe but the structure of existence and its ethical and ontological dimensions.¹³

III. Onto-Techno-Logy

The preceding comparative considerations of contemporary techno-ontologies share certain common features.

Firstly, three examples should be enough to show that there is indeed something like an epochal desire for a techno-ontology that can be found in all currents of continental philosophy (although this term has lost much of its signification, if it ever had any, since the discussion happens essentially in English in a style close to analytical philosophy). It is clear that none of the contemporary techno-ontologies can be reduced to a sociology of modern gadgets, for they are really ontologies that use technology as a key *terminus technicus* for a new ontology.

All of the ontologies that we have surveyed here share some principles. All of them think Being as *plurality* instead of totality, but they admit of regional and provisional wholes and often analyze them in terms of “milieu,” “territory,” and “ecology.”

All of these ontologies also think Being as a surprising happening or as a becoming without origin and end (and becoming itself is thought of as energy, power, working, or functioning). The technological terminology has been chosen precisely in order to avoid explaining becoming in terms of purposiveness: it is simple becoming without cause and aim, but nonetheless with a possibility of change and invention. It also allows for a

¹³ Aurelien Barrau has shown how this can be applied to cosmological considerations in *What's These Worlds Coming To?*

breaking away from simple natural necessity, for the motive of change and of invention opens towards another kind of thinking of the event.

All techno-ontologies under scrutiny here think being in terms of *materiality* (or corporeality), but their conception of materiality is very immaterial. Materiality is thought in dynamic terms: matter is energy, plasticity, and change; existence is eventful and surprising. Matter is abstract without being ideal, for it can only be encountered in reality or existence itself.

The ultimate question of the nature of onto-technological Being is not about its Creator, Origin, or End, but about the modality of its being here and now, as it is. The modality of technological being is *contingency*: being does not rest on necessity, like in onto-theology, and neither does it rest on the notion of possibility, like in thinking of the *Ereignis*. Instead, being rests on the contingency of its being as it is. It could be argued that a techno-ontology illustrates the principle of contingency better than the scientifically inspired naturalist ontology first exposed by Meillassoux in *After Finitude* because it is intuitively evident that a technological object is a contingent invention, whereas it is somewhat counterintuitive (although admittedly fascinating) to think that natural laws themselves would be so contingent that they might suddenly change. Sometimes post-phenomenological thinkers like Nancy analyze the experience of contingency in terms of *surprise*: surprise is the mode of encountering the fact that being, “without why,” nonetheless is. Said otherwise, the being of things is not an expected consequence of the fact of thinking being, but on the contrary, it is the surprise of being that makes one think.¹⁴

The advantage of thinking Being in terms of technics is the intuitive clarity of the metaphor. Its disadvantage is the obvious artificiality of technics. As we saw in our discussion concerning speculative realism and object-oriented ontology, it is somewhat counter-intuitive to abstract technology from the human (or living) agency that makes or operates it. More importantly, as technics is neither true nor eternal, but artificial, fictive, and provisional, do we not have to admit that the metaphysical

¹⁴ Nancy develops his theory of surprise in particular in his *Experience of Freedom*, which is the basis of the entire thinking of the singular plural being and of echotechnics. It is possible to inquire into the “materiality” of technology either through “speculative materialism” or through post-phenomenological “elemental thinking” (Sallis, Toadvine). My hypothesis is that the phenomenon of technology actually permits us to overcome the opposition between these two competing paradigms (the possibility of such an overcoming has recently been examined by Gert-Jan van der Heiden in *Ontology after Ontotheology*, but he does not speak about technology). It reveals the unjustified scientism in speculative materialism and nostalgia for pure nature in elemental thinking, and it obligates us to examine being insofar as it *takes place* in the *contingency* of the technological auto-production of reality.

constructions examined above are nothing but artificial *constructions*? The question of the status of a techno-ontological theory will finally differentiate between speculative realist and post-phenomenological onto-technologies. Knowing that technics itself is artificial and fictive, are not the metaphysical constructions that rely on it also mere constructions?

As we have seen, Bryant and Harman, following a Deleuzian tradition, build speculative constructions that rely on nothing but their internal coherence. Does this make them false? Deleuze would say that this depends on what one can do with them. The value of a concept does not depend on its truth but on its usefulness: if it permits us to do something, then it is *good for* something—this is how consequences ultimately verify a hypothesis. However, without an examination of the *constructing* agent of the speculative construction, the status of the whole remains unclarified in the cases of Bryant and Harman (but not so in the case of Deleuze and Guattari, who studied philosophical techniques of making philosophy in *What is Philosophy?*).

Post-phenomenological thinkers like Nancy proceed differently. They do not start by constructing a system and by giving form to the subject that could construct it. They have always started with deconstructions or archaeologies of inherited discourses concerning being and subjectivity. Their aim is not to fix a ground of being but to show how the question of ground comes to be and what the schemes and categories are through which the question is delivered to us. In this case, we have seen why technical and machinic categories have become useful, and why their obvious artificiality helps us to understand the artificial aspect of all enunciations of thinking. This is how one thinks Being by playing with its shadow, instead of looking for a nonexistent true being that would cast the shadow.

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